

Beyond Crime Statistics: Why We Urgently Need People-Centred Metrics to Measure Urban Security

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Summary

This policy brief highlights the risks of relying exclusively on crime-based data to measure security in cities, and calls for the incorporation and institutionalisation of people-centred metrics within existing security frameworks. Although traditional indicators like homicide rates, arrests, and crime statistics are important, relying exclusively on them creates dangerous blind spots, narrows policy imagination, and incentivises short-term, enforcement-heavy responses that often leave the deeper drivers of insecurity and their multidimensional and systemic impact unaddressed.

By complementing crime statistics with measures that capture people's lived experiences of insecurity, their vulnerability to interconnected risks, and their access to protection systems, we can generate stronger evidence for policy and practice, and realign incentives toward prevention, structural reform, and long-term investment. Such a shift is essential to addressing the drivers of violence and insecurity, improving people's lives, and ensuring that security strategies protect, rather than undermine, people's rights.

About the Author

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Alexandra has contributed to academic and policy debates on urban security and developed tools and methodologies to support violence reduction and safety strategies. Her experience spans participatory and action-oriented research and advisory work in Colombia, Mexico, Jamaica, and South Africa, including serving as expert adviser to UN-Habitat's Global Network on Safer Cities and consultant to UN Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS).

Introduction

The indicators we use to measure urban security are not neutral technical tools. They reflect how we define the problem of violence and insecurity in cities, what we choose to value in public policy and, just as importantly, what we overlook. Metrics do not merely describe reality. They shape incentives to act, institutional priorities, and political decisions.

For decades, security success has been measured primarily through fluctuations in homicide rates, violent crime statistics and the capacity to combat organised crime. From Medellín to Tijuana, from Cape Town to San Salvador, from Chicago to Glasgow and London, interventions are judged by reductions in the most visible forms of direct violence, whether these are achieved through punitive and militarised strategies, preventive approaches, or a combination of both.

These indicators are certainly crucial. Lives lost to violence demand urgent attention. The devastating impact of crime on individuals, families, and communities requires accountability, and public policy must be grounded in evidence. However, using violent crime statistics as the exclusive yardstick of security success is increasingly problematic.

Relying solely on these indicators does more than just provide an incomplete picture of the insecurities people experience daily in cities and towns. It also narrows policy imagination and creates incentives for short-term, reactive responses over long-term structural solutions. In many contexts, it has also legitimised militarised and authoritarian approaches that undermine people's rights, weaken democratic institutions, and leave the deeper drivers of urban insecurity unaddressed.

At a time of rising militarisation, democratic fragility, and deepening urban inequalities, we urgently need to embrace and institutionalise people-centred metrics of security, particularly

people-centred metrics of security, particularly at the local level. Metrics that capture how insecurity is actually experienced in everyday life. Metrics that recognise the multidimensional and systemic nature of contemporary risks to people's lives and dignity. Metrics that create incentives and generate evidence for sustained, integral investment in strategies that protect people comprehensively from those risks and address the structural drivers of violence.



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The Limitations of Current Security Measures

Problem 1: Statistics of violent crime leave blind spots of people's lived realities of insecurity

Relying exclusively on violent crime-related data is inadequate not only because of the "dark figure" of crime: offences that are never reported due to distrust in institutions, fear, or the normalisation of certain forms of violence, but also because it fails to capture how insecurity is actually experienced in everyday life.

Across cities in Latin America, the Caribbean¹, and South Africa² where we have undertaken participatory research and collaborative projects over the last fifteen years, one pattern has been consistent: Violent crime indicators capture the visible tip of the iceberg, the most extreme manifestations of insecurity, but they fail to account for the multiple, less visible forms of insecurity that endanger people's lives and dignity, which often persist even when lethal violence declines.

For instance, despite reductions in homicide rates, countless women and girls in many cities continue to live with fear of abuse, harassment and assault, at home, on their way to work or school, to the corner shop, or on public transport. In some underprivileged communities, this risk comes not only from relatives, strangers or criminal actors, but also from those expected to provide “security.” Women and girls in vulnerable neighbourhoods of Medellín, Kingston, Tijuana, and Durban reported that while they welcome police and military deployments to reduce shootouts in their communities, they simultaneously fear abuses of power by members of the security forces as they mistreat residents and even groom young girls often leaving them pregnant and unsupported.

Declines in lethal violence also fail to capture the constant fear faced by young men of being profiled, harassed, or subjected to excessive force because of how they look or where they come from. Nor do they capture the persistent anxiety experienced by their families, and the fear that they may still be exploited and instrumentalised by criminal groups to sell drugs, transport weapons, collect extortion payments, or assist in illicit activities, in exchange for money and false promises of recognition, protection, and respect that they are denied elsewhere in society.

Homicide statistics do not tell us about growing violence in school environments or digital spaces, about everyday tensions and conflicts that escalate between neighbours, or about the gradual erosion of trust and social cohesion within communities. They do not reveal whether members of the LGBTQ+ community and other minorities can walk through the city without fear of discrimination or abuse.

More fundamentally, the dominant security indicators we rely on fail to recognise that insecurity is experienced in multidimensional and systemic ways³. People do not face insecurity solely as a consequence of violent

crime, but as the result of interconnected and mutually reinforcing economic, environmental, institutional, community and technological factors⁴.

In many neighbourhoods, people experience insecurity not only due to the presence of gangs or criminal groups, but also because the cumulative effects of poverty, social exclusion, institutional neglect, fragile systems of support, lack of access to vital services and entrenched gender norms place their lives, livelihoods, and dignity at risk⁵. These risks interact and compound over time, and they are experienced differently depending on gender, age, race, class, sexual orientation, migration status, and place of residence.

These dynamics are echoed in cities in the Global North. In London, for example, participatory and youth-led research shows that young people’s sense of insecurity is shaped not only by knife crime, but also by housing insecurity, limited access to support, including mental health services, as well as stigma, racial profiling, and economic exclusion⁶.

When security responses fail to address insecurity as people experience it, they not only fall short of guaranteeing the right to human security⁷; they also erode trust in institutions and leave many of the structural drivers of violence untouched.

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Problem 2: The way we are measuring security undermines structural solutions

Overreliance on violent crime statistics creates a practical and political problem: it limits our ability to measure, and therefore prioritise, the factors that actually prevent violence and insecurity in the long term.

Addressing the deep-rooted drivers of violence and insecurity in cities requires time and sustained investment in integrated, cross-sector interventions⁸ that confront the complex web of risks shaping people’s lives. This includes reducing structural inequalities; strengthening access to dignified and stable housing; improving neighbourhood infrastructure and the quality of public spaces; expanding access to mental health support; creating meaningful economic opportunities; rebuilding institutional trust; reinforcing protection systems; transforming harmful social and gender norms; and strengthening communities’ capacity for conflict resolution, mutual support and social cohesion.

These efforts are long-term, preventive, and often indirect in their impact on crime rates. They require coordination across sectors and political cycles. However, when institutional success is judged primarily through short-term reductions in crime statistics, there are few incentives to invest in these types of responses.

In many cities, policymakers and municipal officials are attempting to pursue more integrated and preventive strategies. Yet they often lack the tools and metrics needed to demonstrate the impact of interventions aimed at addressing structural vulnerability rather than immediate crime reductions alone. Without indicators that capture improvements in lived security, dignity, stability, and trust, these strategies struggle to secure sustained political and financial support.

The same challenge affects civil society and grassroots organisations. Across cities, from

Medellín to London, community-based initiatives play a crucial role in reducing multidimensional insecurity in people’s lives. They support young people, women and children; strengthen social networks; provide safe spaces; mediate conflicts; foster active and critical citizenship; and create pathways to essential services and away from criminal involvement. What these organisations strengthen is human security, the underlying condition that prevents multidimensional risks from escalating into violence. Yet much of their work does not “speak the language” of crime reduction statistics.

If we do not measure improvements in lived security, dignity, stability, belonging, trust, and opportunity, we cannot demonstrate their value. As a result, interventions that tackle root causes remain politically vulnerable, underfunded, or invisible, even when they are among the most effective long-term strategies for violence prevention.

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Problem 3: Relying on crime-centered metrics can create dangerous incentives

Crime-centred metrics do not merely define priority security outcomes; they also shape the kinds of responses that governments are incentivised to pursue.

In Latin America, a region deeply affected by high levels of lethal violence, overreliance on traditional indicators has reinforced security approaches framed in the logic of “war”: wars

on drugs, wars on gangs, wars on crime. Within this paradigm, success is measured primarily through:

- Homicide reductions
- Arrests and captures
- Drug seizures and weapon confiscations
- Incarceration rates
- The dismantling of criminal organisations
- The expansion of state enforcement capacity

These indicators are important. Organised crime in the region has become highly sophisticated and transnational. Violence by criminal organizations has devastated communities, and states have legitimate responsibilities to protect their populations.

However, this framework has narrowed what counts as security and created a dangerous incentive structure where investment naturally flows toward enforcement, coercion, and short-term control strategies that often justify curtailing, rather than protecting people’s rights.

Security success becomes tied primarily to the state’s coercive and combat capacity, rather than to its ability to protect people from the multiple factors that make them unsafe in their everyday lives. While dismantling criminal groups and reducing their capacity for lethal violence is essential, it is not sufficient.

Moreover, what is presented as success within these “war” paradigms does not always translate into lived security. High-profile arrests or lethal operations targeting criminal leaders, for example, have in many contexts triggered fragmentation, internal disputes, territorial battles, and renewed violence, generating fear and instability within communities. A short-term gain in the war against organised crime can produce longer-term human insecurity.

This dynamic is not confined to Latin America. In the current geopolitical climate (marked by rising global tensions, ongoing armed conflicts,

expanding criminal economies in parts of Europe, increasing military budgets, and renewed great-power competition) security debates in North America and Europe are also shifting toward more traditional notions of security: the elimination or containment of internal or external threats through armament, deterrence, border control, and military strength.

While such concerns respond to real geopolitical instability, when security becomes synonymous with enforcement capacity and military capability, there is a risk that urban security, too, is reduced to hardware, surveillance, and force, neglecting the everyday conditions that allow people to live without fear and with dignity, trust, and stability.

Crime-centred metrics that are not balanced by people-centred security measures, can normalise militarised and punitive approaches, marginalise preventive strategies, and legitimise responses that undermine democratic governance and human rights in the name of “security.”

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Toward People-Centered Metrics of Security

Given the limitations of crime-centred metrics, the key question is: How can we measure security in ways that provide a deeper understanding of the problem and equip policymakers with tools to act effectively?

Reframing security through a people-centred perspective shifts the focus from controlling crime to protecting people from the complex web of factors that threaten their lives, rights,

and dignity. Under this framework, the central objective of security policy is not only to reduce violence or suppress criminal activity, but to strengthen the conditions that enable people to live safely and meaningfully, and exercise their rights, as well as to address the underlying factors that drive both visible and less visible forms of violence.

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From a people-centred perspective, the guiding questions that inform the development of indicators and the evaluation of policy performance change to:

- How can people be protected comprehensively from the multiple insecurities that shape their lives?
- How can dignified living conditions be guaranteed in ways that reduce vulnerability to violence and allow people to exercise their rights?
- What kinds of institutional relationships and capacities foster trust, accountability, and prevention?
- How can socio-economic, urban, and community conditions be strengthened so that violence and criminality do not take root or reproduce themselves?

In this approach, security is not defined solely as the absence of crime, but as the presence of protective conditions (social, economic, institutional, environmental, technological, and relational) that enable people to live without fear and with agency and freedom. Accordingly, people-centred metrics seek to capture:

- Differences in experiences of safety across population groups based on age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, place of residence, and other factors.
- Exposure to non-lethal forms of violence and coercion across various socialization spaces like home, school, work, public, and digital spaces.
- The capacity of institutions to protect people from threats beyond lethal violence and property crime.
- Institutional trust and citizens' experiences with authorities and public services.
- Economic stability and vulnerability to exploitation.
- Access to housing, health services, mental health support, and urban spaces that enable dignified living and supportive networks.
- Experiences of discrimination and social exclusion.
- Community cohesion and capacity for peaceful conflict resolution.
- The ability to move freely without fear.
- The capacity to imagine and plan for the future.

People-centered metrics recognise that security is multidimensional and systemic. They enable policymakers to identify how different groups experience insecurity and why, which is essential for setting effective policy priorities. They also shed light on the structural drivers that conventional crime statistics often obscure.

The challenge of the local lived experience

A key challenge in measuring security from a people-centred perspective is that insecurity is experienced locally. Even global or national problems manifest in specific neighbourhoods, communities, and households. Meaningful measurement therefore requires sub-local data that captures how people experience threats to their lives, livelihoods, and dignity. Yet in many

contexts, local-level data is scarce and institutional capacities for generating it are limited, making measurement at this scale particularly difficult.

Despite these constraints, important efforts are emerging across different regions of the world to advance broader contextualised approaches to local security measurement that go beyond crime:

- In Japan, human security indicators aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been developed at the municipal level, incorporating dignity as a core dimension of local governance⁹.
- In Canada, initiatives such as the Community & Urban Safety Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit¹⁰, support cities in monitoring community safety and wellbeing.
- At the global level, the UN-Habitat's Urban Safety Monitor¹¹ promotes indicators that incorporate governance and institutional capacity.
- The Glocal Human Security Index¹² enables cities and communities to monitor security conditions through a people-centred, rights-based framework that measures individuals' vulnerabilities to risks, access to protection systems, and freedom to exercise their rights across nine interconnected dimensions of life.

Together, these initiatives reflect a growing recognition that measuring security in a meaningful way requires contextualised, multidimensional tools grounded at the local level.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Security

Security has long been reduced to the management of violence, when it should mean the effective protection of people's lives, rights, dignity, and futures. In an era marked by militarisation, democratic fragility, and widening inequalities, narrowing security to crime control risks reinforcing the very dynamics that produce insecurity.

Complementing violent crime data with people-centred metrics allows security to be understood not merely as the reduction of visible forms of violence or the suppression of criminal activity, but as the provision of the protection people need to live meaningful, connected, and dignified lives. States have a responsibility to reduce violence and enforce the law. But they must also guarantee people experience security in their everyday lives.

If we are serious about preventing violence, strengthening democracy, and protecting communities, we must institutionalise metrics that reflect how insecurity is actually experienced, and incentivise long-term, structural solutions.

Expanding what we measure expands what becomes politically possible. When institutional success is defined not only by reductions in lethal violence, arrests, and seizures, but also by improvements in lived security, governments are more likely to invest in prevention, structural reform, social infrastructure, and long-term institutional change.

Notes and References

1. See: [Humanising Security through Action-oriented Research in Latin America](#) by Pearce & Abello Colak (2021); [Vínculos: espacios seguros para mujeres y jóvenes en América Latina y el Caribe](#). Eds. Angarita Cañas, Carolina Sánchez Henao (2019); [Human Security and Chronic Violence in Mexico: New Perspectives and Proposals from Below](#) Eds. Kloppe-Santamaria & Abello Colak (2019)
2. See: [Making Cities and Human Settlements Safer after COVID-19](#) (UNTFHS); [Addressing Urban Violence through Participatory Research with Youth in Colombia and South Africa](#)
3. [Mapping Systems of Human \(In\)security To Understand the COVID-19 Pandemic's Enduring Impact on Urban Violence](#) by Abello Colak (2023)
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5. [Why Addressing Human Insecurity is the Key to Safer Cities](#) by Abello Colak, A. (2025)
6. [Understanding Young People's Experiences of Violence in Lambeth](#) by LPAC
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9. [SDGs and Local Communities: How to Create Human Security Indicators in Your Town!](#) By Yukio Takasu and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
10. Community & Urban Safety Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit. [Canadian Centre for Safer Communities](#)
11. [Urban Safety Monitor](#). UN Habitat, EFUS, and FIXED
12. [Glocal Human Security Index](#). Developed by Security 4 Peace



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